

1-2018

On the Defensive

Erika Simpson

Western University, simpson@uwo.ca

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Citation of this paper:

Simpson, E. (2018b, Jan. 7) On the defensive. Syndicated Opinion Piece (Op.Ed) in the Postmedia Network, Canada's largest chain of online and hard copy newspapers [hereafter Postmedia Network Op Ed.].



Erika Simpson

PhD, Political Science Professor

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Just before Christmas, the U.S. Congress rushed through the Pentagon's request for US\$4 billion to detect, defeat and defend against ballistic missiles.

"We are ordering \$4 billion worth of missile defence equipment and missiles themselves. Very important," President Donald Trump said at the White House. "Top of the line. Best in the world. We make the best military product in the world, and nobody is even close."

There are few details about what the money will be spent on, but \$2.1 billion is earmarked for 20 missiles that will attempt to intercept incoming ballistic missiles above Earth's atmosphere, along with a network of radars and ground-based interceptors.

Now that Trump has made nuclear modernization his highest national defence priority, concerns have arisen that the U.S. administration will again ask Canada to participate in the U.S. ballistic missile defence (BMD) project.

Despite widespread fears about militarizing outer space, the U.S. has long sought the co-operation of its NATO allies in BMD. But concerns are widespread that America plans to dominate space militarily, including possibly place deadly lasers and nuclear weapons in orbit.

The last time a U.S. president requested Canada's co-operation in BMD, George W. Bush made a high-profile public plea on Canadian soil. Prime Minister Paul Martin decided no. Conservative Leader Stephen Harper promised that, if elected, he would reverse the Liberal decision and put the

question before Parliament for a free vote. But as prime minister from 2006 to 2015, he didn't and the issue lay dormant.

The development of a safe and successful BMD system remains far off, Most U.S. tests have failed.

The U.S. BMD system would need the capability of conducting a first strike from space. If U.S. nuclear weapons were deployed in space, they would be hundreds of times more powerful than the bombs that devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Joining in BMD could make Canada more insecure, especially if nuclear debris from errant or colliding ballistic missiles rained over Canada.

In the 1950s, top-secret U.S. plans were for nuclear-armed American Bomarc missiles based in Canada to intercept Soviet bombers carrying nuclear payloads over Canadian air space, thus raining nuclear fallout over southern Manitoba and Saskatchewan. But Prime Minister John Diefenbaker and his minister of external affairs Howard Green ultimately decided not to equip the Bomarcs with nuclear warheads.

Now Kim Jong-Un, among the world's youngest and most inexperienced leaders, is supreme commander of a formidable (albeit malnourished and pitifully underequipped) million-member conventional army. In his new year's address, he said, "The U.S. should know that the button for nuclear weapons is on my table" and "The entire area of the U.S. mainland is within our nuclear strike range. . . . The United States can never start a war against me and our country."

The next day, Trump tweeted in reply, "North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un just stated that the 'Nuclear Button is on his desk at all times.' Will someone from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works."

Will Trump's newly-confirmed security advisers refrain from reigning him in because his threats serve a wider purpose of full nuclear capabilities? Are they trying to frighten North Americans into pinning their hopes on a space-based missile defence system?

It's a system not yet feasible. It is unlikely any nation will be able to 100 per cent reliably shoot down an adversary's nuclear rockets in space. And just one miss means nuclear devastation below.

Canadians in "Fortress America" should ask themselves what is the use of walls without a roof? Will America, Russia and China engage in an arms race in outer space? Could the Canadian government be stuck with a mounting tab as costs of developing a BMD rapidly escalate? And how might Canadian firms benefit from research and development on space-based weapons of war?

In the 2000s, U.S. deputy defence secretary John Hamre told Canadians our involvement in missile defence would be pivotal but not integral to a missile defence success, while the deputy commander of U.S. Space Command, Vice Admiral Herbert Browne, made headlines when he warned the U.S. would have no obligation to defend Ottawa from attack if Canada is not part of a missile defence system.

During the last round of debate, polls showed more than 60 per cent of Canadians opposed participation. That figure was even higher in Quebec, a province where every party needs support to win an election.

The U.S. and Canada will co-host a major international meeting of foreign ministers to discuss the North Korean crisis on Jan. 16 in Vancouver.

American moves to build a more robust nuclear enterprise will also undergo diplomatic scrutiny when the UN holds the first High-Level Conference on Nuclear Disarmament from May 14-16. Many delegates will feel more comfortable with a push for disarmament than with joining the Trump administration in setting up systems to destabilize arms control. Wary of Trump's aggressive tweets and unilateral threats to destroy North Korea, as well as tear up the arms control agreement with Iran, diplomats will share an interest in keeping Earth's orbit a demilitarized zone.

Associate Prof. Erika Simpson is the author of NATO and the Bomb and other scholarly publications. This is an excerpt from her Feb. 8 address to the Women's Canadian Club in London, Ont.

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